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978-0-521-09901-1 - Household and Family in Past Time

Edited by Peter Laslett and Richard Wall

Excerpt

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1. Introduction: the history of the family

Peter Laslett

I. THE HISTORY OF THE FAMILY

The family cannot be said to be neglected as a subject of study. More effort in fact is probably going towards the examination and analysis of this fundamental institution than in any other field of enquiry into human behaviour. The only comprehensive bibliography, a large volume of computer printout as it has to be, lists over 12,000 titles published in this century up to 1964, though over half appeared within the ten preceding years, and less than a twentieth before 1929.¹ Perhaps the number of studies devoted to the family will have doubled again before the present book appears, but it is not to be expected that many will have been added to the 250 or so which in 1964 the compilers assigned to the heading of *history*.

This lack of recent interest in the past condition and development of the human family seems to be due to a number of circumstances. The obvious, if perhaps not the effective cause, is scarcity of evidence and the difficulties of dealing with that which is known to exist. Prominent among these difficulties are the intricacies of defining the subject, and of deciding what are in fact the varying senses in which 'family' can be said to have had a history, or a series of histories. This volume, as will be spelt out at length in due course, is given over to the comparative history of the family in a particular sense, the family as a group of persons living together, a household, what we shall call a coresident domestic group.

I must insist as strongly as possible at this early point in the text, that this book is not concerned with the family as a network of kinship. As is made plain at several points in this introductory chapter, the evidence for the study of kin relations outside coresident domestic groups in past time does not yet exist for England, nor in any complete form for any other country known to me. The statements made here apply only to relationships *within* familial groups, not to relationships *between* them.

¹ Aldous and Hill, *International bibliography of marriage and the family* (1967). Works in Japanese seem to form a disproportionate part of those classed as in any way historical. It seems possible that authors of works on historical themes may have been less disposed to make that fact clear in their titles than others.

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When we come to the knotty problems of detailed and precise definition, terminology and classification (see Section II below) we shall insist again on the uncertainties created by the paucity of usable materials on our chosen subject. Nevertheless some knowledge has always been available of the history of the family in all its senses. The reasons why it has failed to attract much attention in our generation from historians and social scientists generally are themselves of some interest to the study of the domestic group.

I UNPOPULARITY OF THE SUBJECT

There is in the first place the relative indifference of social scientists to the time dimension, and of historians to the subject matter of the social sciences. Sociologists of the family have evidently been satisfied with contemporary materials and have tested their hypotheses about familial attitudes, the institution of marriage, and even the size and structure of the domestic group itself, with no more than occasional reference to the past. They have set the American family alongside the family on the Malabar Coast, or in the Israeli Kibbutz, or amongst the Tikopia or the Beduin, without attempting to discover what the American family was like a century or two centuries ago. It seems that by the 1950s familial structure in no less than 565 cultures had been recorded, a sample believed to be representative of the whole range of variation in the world.²

In making such extensive contemporaneous comparisons, it does not seem to have been supposed that the human family had no discussable or discoverable past, but that this past was not available for comparative purposes. People have been inclined, therefore, to look upon some of the familial systems now extant amongst the more 'undeveloped' or 'primitive' cultures, as being representative of the past, and probably of the very remote past. 'It is legitimate to assume', says one of the standard authorities, 'that in the prehistoric period the familial structure resembled more or less that of contemporary primitive peoples. This is not merely an inference; it is supported by survivals found among many peoples, particularly among those of northern Europe at the dawn of their history.'³ To this tendency, which goes back a long way in anthropological studies, has to be added the uncritical acceptance of standard or popular histori-

² See Nimkoff and Middleton, *Types of family* (1960), referring to Murdock, *World ethnographic sample* (1957). Comparisons in some detail over ten or a dozen cultures will be found in such works as Nimkoff, *Comparative family systems* (1965) or Bell and Vogel, *A modern introduction to the family* (1960). The practice of comparing familial structures between cultures goes a long way back, to Le Play and even to Montesquieu.

³ Burgess and Locke, *The family* (1953): 15, reproduced unaltered from the first edition (1945): 18. This statement implies knowledge not only of the familial structure of the pre-Christian Scandinavians or Germans, but also of its particulars at the much remoter periods from which parts of that structure had 'survived'. It seems impossible that knowledge of either type can ever be anything but inferential, and the assumption about survival which appears whenever large scale or complex household structure is found, especially in advanced areas, is a major obstacle to the understanding of familial history.

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cal impressions. It is almost as if something in the way of a folk memory of the former condition of the family is being consulted.

It has been shown elsewhere how firm popular conviction can be on such subjects and how misleading.⁴ The social scientists, however, might well explain their uncritical attitude by claiming that it was for the historians to subject these impressions to examination, perhaps along with the demographers. Only very recently, however, have historians begun to acquaint themselves with demography, and only very recently has what can only be called the chasm which has divided historians for so long from social scientists generally begun to pass away.

The existence of this impasse has meant that such historical work as has been done on the domestic group in the past, and in particular on its actual size in Western Europe from the Middle Ages, has been little noticed by historians and has apparently never communicated itself to familial sociologists. Solid foundations for this particular study were laid almost twenty years ago by a historian of the traditional type.⁵ Since then it has been gratuitous to assume for example, if such was the assumption being made either by historians or by familial sociologists, that mean household size in the Europe from which American settlers came in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries was markedly greater than it was in the United States in the 1930s.

The unpopularity of familial history has led to the neglect of those opportunities which did present themselves in the available evidence. It also seems to have ensured that what had already become known to specialists would be overlooked. It is no criticism of the authors of Chapters 20 and 22 of this book to state that a discussion of the size and structure of the household in the Massachusetts census of 1769 or in the first United States Federal Census of 1790, could have appeared at any time in this century, and that a comparison of the census documents for Rhode Island in 1875 with those belonging to a subsequent occasion could have been undertaken at any point during the great outpouring of work on the family which has marked the last few decades. The same is true of the studies of Jean-Noel Biraben on Montplaisant in 1644 and 1836, and of Yves

⁴ For example, the widespread conviction that most girls in England married in their teens in earlier times, for which the evidence, if requested, remarkably often turns out to be one literary context, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This splendid story seems to have spelt out just what most people, even well informed people, wish to believe. See Laslett, *The World we have lost* (1965 i, 1971): Ch. iv; see also Ch. x for a brief discussion of the purchase over the minds of people in our day of the idea that large familial groups ought to have been characteristic of the past. Occasionally literary evidence has been used to criticise the traditional accounts of familial development used by social scientists, as in Furstenberg, *Industrialization and the American family* (1966).

⁵ See the three large volumes of Mols, *Démographie historique des villes d'Europe* (1955) referring to work on household size going back many years and by no means confined to towns. Many of these sources are referred to by Hélin in Chapter 13. Since his main object was to determine a multiplier (see below Section III), Mols confined himself for the most part to traditional historical questions, and showed little curiosity about familial structure or kin linkages; he gives no distribution of households by size from his enormous mass of materials, and does not discuss servants.

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Blayo on Grisy-Suisnes in 1836 and 1851 in Chapters 8 and 9. Comparisons, then, between the size and structure of the domestic group in the present and in the past, and between cultural areas in the present and at given points in the past, which together go to make up the substance of the present volume, have in principle been open to the historian and the social scientist for many years.

But the social sciences themselves over these very years have been marked by a further characteristic which helps to explain the unpopularity of the history of the family. The very term *history* itself represents an earlier phase in their development which probably had to be rejected if properly empirical and adequately comparative research was to get under way.

Rejection of evolutionary theories

The movement which led to the recovery and tabulation of all the known forms of the domestic group began as a reaction against historical, or rather historicist, anthropology and sociology. Up to that time the grand evolutionary theories of such men as Bachofen, Maine, Morgan and McLennan had held the field, theories which stated that there was a necessary succession of familial form to familial form as phases in the development of the whole human race. These earlier thinkers, deeply impressed with the Darwinian theory of the descent of man from the animals, and assuming a time scale which we know now to have been woefully abbreviated, had to face the problem of explaining how civilised, monogamous man evolved from his Simian predecessors. They felt they had to account for the emergence from the 'primeval horde' of the familial group which they themselves experienced and admired. They showed a strong disposition to moralise as well, and this seems to have been less successfully overcome by those who have come after than the evolutionary bias. The family was regarded as fundamental to society not only as its final structural unit, but as the receptacle of its values.

Not everyone amongst these nineteenth-century scholars looked upon the monogamous family of contemporary Western Europe as the highest form of all. The theory of two of those who took a very different view still survives in a sense in our own day. This is the account which Engels and Marx adapted from Morgan, and which insisted that private property and the exploitative family came simultaneously into being at the appointed stage of universal human evolution. The family cannot have been fundamental to society, because it was dependent upon productive relations.⁶ But with this and other less important exceptions, the whole body of evolutionary, historicist thinking about the family succumbed in the middle years of the present century before the attacks of the anthropological field worker, the empirical, comparative social scientist.

⁶ Engels, *Origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884, 1940), confessedly taken by him from Marx's papers. The enormous possible effect of theories of this kind in the hands of those who attain political power is to be seen in the policy towards the family both of the Russian Soviets and of the Chinese Communists in the early years of their régimes, aiming at abolition of the family along with other bourgeois property institutions.

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Much of value has, of course, been taken into the social sciences from these earlier thinkers, but there can be no doubt of their systems being consciously cast aside. Indeed there are those who would say that when nineteenth-century evolutionism was rejected, the only comprehensive theory of familial development ever proposed disappeared without anything being put in its place. After the achievements in the actual observation of sexual and familial behaviour of the world's peoples by such men as Edward Westermarck and above all of Bronislaw Malinowski, little room was left for anything but functional comparison between contemporary 'savages', or members of less 'developed' societies, and industrial man. It is therefore understandable that the question of historical change in the family should seldom have been posed to themselves by those concerned with the family, even in the case of Western Europe and the United States in recent centuries. This especially if it could be tacitly assumed that slightly less advanced societies of the contemporary world represented previous states of the more advanced.

Belief in the large and complex household

The effect was to obscure the necessity for empirical research into the history of the family in all its aspects, but more particularly into the size and structure of domestic groups. Furthermore, a very general supposition that in the past the domestic group was universally and necessarily larger and more complex than it is today in industrial cultures was apparently left undisturbed.

This assumption seems, if anything, to have been strengthened by the innumerable exercises in contemporaneous comparison between pre-industrial and post-industrial. The reason presumably was that the process of modernisation always meant the simplification of social relationships based on kinship, the decline of the tribe and the clan, of the complicated rules which have governed marriage choices in many societies, the decay of familial authority and the progressive reduction of everything towards the rational, uncomplicated, small scale Western industrial model of familial life.

Such a triumph of individualism – a widely used phrase – seemed necessarily to have made the large scale complex household a thing of the past. It did not follow of course that families and households of this kind were therefore dominant in pre-industrial times. But in the prevailing state of opinion just described such a loose inference was evidently quite easy to make. This is apparently the intention of the following further passages from the standard authority already quoted.

The three chief historical stages in the evolution of the family are: the large patriarchal family characteristic of ancient society; the small patriarchal family which had its origins in the medieval period; and the modern democratic family which to a great extent is a product of the economic and social trends accompanying and following the industrial revolution.

The large patriarchal family was present in China, India and Japan. At present the

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majority of the human race probably lives in countries which still regard the approved type of family organisation as that in which the patriarch exercises more or less absolute control over his wife, his unmarried daughters and his sons and their wives and children. In the following case of a Hindu family the widow has succeeded her husband in the dominant position in the family which is composed of three sons and their wives and children and two unmarried daughters. 'My family is not very big. All members cooperate and work for each other. All cook and eat in the same place...'

The small patriarchal family. In medieval society, particularly in the towns, the development of the skills required by the crafts made the large patriarchal family an inefficient instrument. It was superseded by the small patriarchal family, composed of husband, wife and children, with generally the presence of one or two grandparents, one or more unmarried brothers or sisters of the parents, or other relatives.

The modern democratic family. The industrial revolution paved the way for the breakdown of the small patriarchal family and the emergence of the democratic type of family. In the United States, pioneer conditions, the rise of the public school, and the extension of democratic principles accelerated its development.⁷

No actual figures are given in these statements, although the concern is with size, and no references to sources which might contain them. It is not always quite clear whether the family as a coresident group only is being discussed, or whether relatives living elsewhere are also intended. Issues of authority are intermingled with issues of structure. Since none of the evidence surveyed in the studies we are publishing here goes back as far as the period of ancient society, we must suppose that the examples which we do discuss from traditional society are to be compared with the account of what the authors of the textbook we have quoted call the 'small patriarchal family'. Closer attention to their text suggests that the model they have in mind here is in fact the stem-family as portrayed by Le Play, which will have to concern us in the third section of this introductory chapter.

In addition to the indifference to figures there is a similar failure to appreciate the importance of the developmental cycle in domestic groups, and the importance of demographic issues. For the 'small patriarchal family' is apparently supposed to have contained grandparents at all points in time, which must imply an extended life expectation improbable in earlier epochs, and no accepted custom as to the point in the career of a family when the group divides. There are hints however that what is being described is not so much what actually existed universally in past time, but what was present then in people's minds as an approved type, a model to be imitated. Nevertheless we shall find that none of the statements made is likely to survive the critical analysis contained in this book, without fundamental modification.

⁷ Burgess and Locke (1945): 18–21. In the second edition (1953) the Hindu example, from 'the private files of the authors', is omitted. In the full text this family group is said to contain servants, and even a priest; there is a 'big shop' in which the youngest brother works, so the family is not entirely agricultural. No claim is made that this single contemporary Indian family does represent a form of the domestic group in which all or a great part of the whole human race lived during the dominance of 'ancient society', but some such implication seems to be clearly intended.

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Other statements of this persisting outlook both amongst sociologists and historians affected by their theories, if less incautious ones, are referred to by our contributors. The familial sociology of E. W. Hofstee as described in Chapter 12 implies that the 'modern, dynamic pattern of culture' developed unevenly out of a universal extended family situation whose 'remnants' can still be observed in the complex households of the surviving Dutch peasantry. Van der Woude makes short work of this position when he confronts it with the small size and simple composition of the domestic group in Holland and other Dutch provinces in the seventeenth century, though he refers to the 'rise of individualism' in explaining why families in that area were so surprisingly 'modern'. The same could be said of Hayami's account of the astonishing decline of mean household size in his selected Japanese county in Chapter 18. It is to be hoped that this book will help towards the abandonment of the rise of individualism as the universal explainer of familial change. The uncritical assumption of 'survival' must disappear altogether.⁸

There is nothing in the Marxian sociological system which would raise the expectation that in earlier times, both in the feudal and early bourgeois eras, the familial group would have been big and complex. Nevertheless the socialist outlook seems also to have contributed something to the belief in the large household of the past. This may have been due to the association of the monogamous family with exploitation both of women and of servants, whose simultaneous presence might be supposed to have led to big households. Max Weber himself implies in his magisterial way that the rise of capitalist organisation was associated with 'the household community shrinking'.⁹ But there is a much less scholarly, even a propagandist source for the disposition to assume that in one particular area of Europe now under socialist government the large household had originally been the repository of community solidarity of a socialist character, which the good nationalist had to vindicate against the advance of bourgeois capitalism. This was the area of Serbia, now part of Yugoslavia, where the *zadruga* was known to have been present.

The interest taken in the *zadruga* by scholars of all kinds during the present century may well have furthered the belief in the great household as universally associated with the life of the peasantry, if not of the townfolk, in earlier times. This issue can safely be left with Eugene Hammel and Joel Halpern in Chapters 14 and 16.¹⁰ Much greater in its effects in this direction, in my view, is the

⁸ For English references to Hofstee's work, see Hofstee and Kooy, *Traditional household and neighbourhood group* (1956). The prevalence of such a high proportion of multigenerational extended families amongst the remaining Dutch peasantry in the 1950s discussed there seems due to the longer life they lived more than to any survival from the past. But recent work in the Netherlands goes to show that there was great variability in such matters from region to region.

⁹ Weber, *General economic history* (1923, 1961): 111.

¹⁰ See also Hammel, *Household structure in fourteenth-century Macedonia* (typescript), which has a short survey of the place of the *zadruga* in nationalist thinking and in the attitude towards modernisation in the Balkans. It was alternatively exalted and condemned.

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endurance of a respect for that other nineteenth-century familial–historical theory which survived the critique of empirical social science, even if in an attenuated form. This is Frédéric Le Play’s stem-family hypothesis to which we have referred.

The purchase over the minds of scholars of all kinds, of the general assumptions about the large and complex family of the past seems to me to be a singular phenomenon, not adequately explained by the considerations put forward here. As the evidence is surveyed, it becomes difficult not to suppose that there has been an obstinately held wish to believe in what William Goode has trenchantly described as the ‘Classical family of Western nostalgia’.¹¹ This belief, or misbelief, certainly seems to display a notable capacity to overlook contrary facts and to resist attempts at revision.

It seems to have survived, for example, the great body of materials about family size and structure across the contemporary globe gathered by Professor Goode himself and by others¹² in an attempt to reformulate set notions about the association between industrialisation and family size and structure. It has persisted in spite of the fact that anthropologists have long been aware that by no means all, in fact only a bare majority, of the world’s family systems could be called ‘extended’. In Murdock’s sample referred to earlier, ‘301, or 54.8 %, are characterised by the extended family system, and 248, or 45.2 %, by the independent family system’.¹³ Even where the family system was held by Murdock and by the many anthropologists who have observed familial structure in contemporary societies to be extended, simple households were known to be common, sometimes very common. Indeed it is a capital question as to how many households have to be of a particular type, and as to where they must be placed in the social structure, before that familial type can justifiably be described as the predominant system. We shall have to return to this issue in the final section of the Introduction, where the proportion of persons who actually spend their formative years in families of particular types, or are socialised into them as the social scientists might say, will be taken to be the crucial variable.

But this does not complete the list of circumstances which might have been expected to disturb the belief in the large scale family as being characteristic of earlier societies, earlier in the developmental and in the temporal sense. There has been a full scale controversy over Murdock’s own claim that ‘the nuclear family is a universal human grouping’.¹⁴ There has been widespread discussion

¹¹ See Goode, *The theory and measurement of family change* (1968): 321. This article contains a valuable sceptical survey of all the misbeliefs about the family in the contemporary world, and not simply those concerned with its size and structure. In his *World revolution and family patterns* (1963), Goode presented a very wide range of evidence on these topics.

¹² E.g. Petersen, *Demographic conditions and extended family households: Egyptian data* (1968).

¹³ Nimkoff and Middleton (1960): 216.

¹⁴ Murdock, *Social structure* (1949): 2. Murdock goes on to quote Lowie, *Primitive society* (1920), ‘the one fact which stands out beyond all others is that everywhere the husband, wife and immature child constitute a unit apart from the remainder of the community’, and names Malinowski, *Kinship* (1930) and Boas in further support. The persistence of the con-

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of Marion Levy's bold assertion, made on demographic and other grounds, that most of humanity must always have lived in small families. By 1970, in fact, demographers generally had come to recognise that the nuclear family predominates numerically almost everywhere, even in underdeveloped parts of the world.¹⁵ There are now many studies which call into question any necessary connection between industrialisation (however defined, which is part of the issue) and the small, simple, nuclear family of the contemporary world. It is true that these studies are rarely historical, and that they stress the fact that complex familial forms can survive industrialisation rather more than the fact that the nuclear family was there before industrialisation happened. Nevertheless, even in respect of the size and composition of domestic groups in Western society, quite apart from the figures published in successive census documents, there has been some discussion in the census reports themselves of household size, and of problems of housing which often raise issues of structure.¹⁶ There was an *Analysis of the family* in an official publication of the United States Bureau of the Census as long ago as 1909, with figures for size and some structural information for America from 1790 to 1900,¹⁷ and social scientists have sometimes referred to such sources.

But even where facts and figures have been available, it is notable how little analytic effort has gone into them. Numerical statements about the actual dimension and composition of any community of households – village, region or country – are rare, and efforts to recover evidence from before the census have been few.¹⁸ In only one direction can the indifference we have been discussing be

trary view until quite recently is well brought out by his citation from Linton, proclaiming in *The study of man* (1936) that the nuclear family plays an 'insignificant role in the lives of many societies'. It must be remembered however that Murdock is not claiming that the nuclear family (simple family household) is the universal form of the coresident domestic group, as we call it here. His position is that within all such groups, whether simple, extended or multiple (i.e. joint or composite, to use alternative terms) the conjugal family unit of spouses and children retains an independent identity.

¹⁵ See Levy, *Aspects of the analysis of family structure* (1965), Bogue, *Principles of demography* (1969), Kono, *The determinants and consequences of population trends* (typescript).

¹⁶ For the family and industrialisation, see Greenfield, *Industrialization and the family* (1961), Castillo, Weisblat and Villareal, *The concepts of nuclear and extended family* (1968), etc., and for the censuses, references in Chapter 4. British census reports sometimes give foreign figures.

¹⁷ United States Bureau of the Census, *A century of population growth* (1909): Ch. VIII, the source used by Parten and Reeves, *Size and composition of American families* (1937). Nimkoff and Ogburn, *Technology and the changing family* (1955) are said by Goode to use census data to suggest that 'perhaps the family never has been large in size'. See Goode (1968): 321.

¹⁸ Though see the work of Mols (1955) and that of Russell and others cited below. Social science textbooks are the least satisfactory in this respect; apart from Burgess and Locke (1953, 1945), see for example, Kirkpatrick, *The family as process and institution* (1955, 1963). Even Ogburn and Nimkoff, *A handbook of sociology* (1940, 1960) retain a chapter on the family sketching its historical development, never mentioning a mean or distribution by size, though it reads as if the family in earlier times must have been large. In this and most such accounts, it is the omission of all reference to household members other than kin, that is mostly the servants, which is so distortive as a description of earlier forms of the domestic group, especially in Europe.

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said to have been partially incomplete, and then rather amongst the historians than amongst the social scientists. This is in respect to familial attitudes, the succession of ideas which men have had about what the family should be and how individuals should comport themselves within it. Even here of course the number of works is small as compared with those on other aspects of the family, and we shall not find that these studies have done anything to correct the misapprehension about size and structure. Quite the contrary. Nevertheless familial attitudes are as important to the history of the domestic group as they are to the remainder of this unwieldy field of enquiry, and we must give some attention to them.

2 THE HISTORY OF FAMILIAL ATTITUDES

The effect of family structure on attitudes, on sentiment, responses, on the set of the personality, is the major reason why it has attracted so much attention from the social scientists. Obviously there is little to be gained from recovering the facts about the size and composition of the domestic group unless their influence on behaviour can be gauged. But it is one thing to get to know what familial attitudes were in the past, and quite another to argue from them back to what the size and structure of the domestic group must have been.

Sources and literature

Lest it should be supposed that inferences of this kind are unimportant or uncommon, two examples are given in what follows. Both are drawn from discussions of the family and household amongst English speakers in pre-industrial times.

The seventeenth century patriarchal family had many of the characteristics of the patriarchal household. It included, not only wife and children, but often younger brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces: male superiority and primogeniture were unquestioned. More striking was the presence of a very large number of servants, whose subjection to the head of the household was absolute.

This is to be found in the introduction to a favourite source for the history of the family as conventionally conceived, a polemical work written by a man of the past to persuade his contemporaries on a particular social and political issue.¹⁹

The family familiar to the early colonists was a patrilineal group of extended kinship gathered into a single household. By modern standards it was large. Besides children it included a wide range of other dependents; nieces, and nephews, cousins, and, except for families at the lowest rung of society, servants in filial discipline. In the

¹⁹ Laslett, *Patriarcha and other works of Sir Robert Filmer* (1949): 24. This passage was written in entire ignorance of what any set of domestic groups in seventeenth-century England actually consisted in. Filmer was the patriarchal writer who was attacked by John Locke, the philosopher, in his famous *Two Treatises of Government* (1690).